

# Restoration project along Murphy Creek under way

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CLEMENTS -- Bulldozers on Monday scraped away brush, felled trees and hauled dirt in a rural wilderness spot in the Lower Mokelumne River watershed.

But the work crew wasn't clearing land for a new residential subdivision.

Instead, the operation signaled the long-awaited start of an effort involving property owners and public agencies to restore habitat along Murphy Creek.

Murphy Creek is part of the watershed that runs from the Camanche Dam to the confluence of the Mokelumne and Cosumnes rivers.

The project south of Liberty Road calls for the removal of an earthen dam and non-native blackberry bushes to restore the natural flow of the Mokelumne's largest tributary.

"We had meeting after meeting after meeting," Clements landowner Steve Holmes said of the project, which was conceived about four years ago. "We had meetings to see who was interested, what ought to be done and how to get funding. It's good to see work actually taking place."

The dirt used to form the dam will go back to where it originally came from -- the sides of the creek, said Joe Merz, a fish biologist with East Bay Municipal Utility District.

Later, the relocated soil will host native grasses, oaks and willows, he said.

Workers are expected to plant native vegetation and repair bank erosion.

The dam was built decades ago to create a watering hole for livestock. Ranchers will rely on wells for water for their cattle and horses, Merz said.

Also soon to disappear are the unsightly blackberries that choke off parts of the creek.

"The blackberries have just taken over," Holmes' wife, Melissa, said.

With the dam and blackberries gone, the Holmes and others hope that salmon and other native wildlife will eventually flourish in and around the creek.

The project will also study whether to modify a culvert to further improve fish access, said John Brodie, watershed coordinator with the San Joaquin County Resource Conservation District.

The project someday may look at taking out other dams on the northern portion of the creek, Merz said.

Grant funding of about \$395,000 from the CALFED Bay/Delta Program -- a state and federal consortium that devises measures to improve water quality -- and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation helped launch the creek rehabilitation. Other agencies contributed technical assistance worth about \$290,000, Brodie said.

But ranchers Bev and Jack Sparrowk are credited for coming up with the idea of reviving the creek -- a cause supported by several other families.

"All the neighbors there are excited to see the creek get back to a more pristine type of atmosphere," Bev Sparrowk said in an earlier interview.

The landowners will keep watch on the health of the creek habitat, and with advice from conservation officials will remove future blackberry growth, Brodie said.

From the planning of the project to the ongoing maintenance of the creek, the residents' participation is a prime example of the kind of voluntary stewardship needed to rejuvenate the ecosystems and threatened wildlife throughout the watershed, Brodie said.

The creek project has brought residents closer together, many of whom live scattered about the countryside.

"Sometimes we just meet because we've become friends during the process," Steve Holmes said. "We get to know (neighbors) and know you can call on them."

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